

That was the great fall all shuttering  
 so sick he missed the river  
 smashed instead on the dock  
 old dry bones  
 must have snapped --  
 (they were the killer kids  
 all intellect)  
 if he had met the ones from 1969 first  
 he might have come down  
 from the poetry tower  
 to join hands  
 with the people.

Now it is dark Henry  
 and we cry your memory  
 a bit -- the lank old man  
 all Anglo-Irish  
 straining to capture intellect  
 in a bottle: the brain  
 a specimen  
 but it doesn't work that way  
 anymore.  
 (the people cannot wait  
 for the sound of thought  
 while hunger gnaws the earth.)

#### PORTRAIT OF HENRY

Henry had been poor for a long time -- poor and sick and ugly and old -- he had always been old and he had always been poor. The ugliness came and went: at times when his eyes flashed he was beautiful and at times when he was angry he looked well. I knew him during the days when he was just getting a break, when the lovers of literature (as he called them) were starting to mention him with interest and respect and I liked him best then. He was not a legend yet, just a man.

He lived in a small, nondescript flat in Hollywood. There were two rooms and a kitchen, one water colour painting on the living room wall and a sign a friend had made from one of those plastic print machines whose words I forget.

We always brought the beer to Henry and sometimes we supplied him with good cigars. He was usually six to

eight beers ahead when we arrived, deep in his racing form. When he was working at his machine we did not bother him.

The first time I came, the two of us, Steve and I sat across from him on the ruined couch. I wanted to discuss literature. He hated to talk about literature. "It's something you make, not talk about," but I got my way. Henry liked to talk about women and horses, But I had come to talk about literature and I got my way.

He liked Ezra Pound and he liked Céline. He told me that right off. He liked Knut Hamsun and he liked Jeffers. He did not like poets. He hated critics. I was a critic, or trying to be, for a local paper. He did not like me.

He did not like the way I smiled all the time, a nervous habit I inherited from my father. He did not like my boots and he did not like my fine new sweater made in Austria. But I liked him just the same in my way and he saw that too and said "Ok, we'll talk about literature."

He liked Hemingway, he told me. "And you've been to France, I guess?" I nodded yes. "I'd like to go," he said "but it's too late. France is for the young. Go on."

I told him I liked Hemingway too. Steve squirmed. He opened us each a beer then drank a deep draft on his and lit a cigar. He thanked us for the cigars. "Everyone brings beer but they never bring cigars." He puffed and I talked. Steve drank his beer.

I mentioned Robert Bly. "Bly is ok," he said. "Just ok." I talked about Galway Kinnell. He did not like Kinnell. I talked about Neruda. He yawned. Steve sat quietly drinking his beer. He is the best of listeners. He is the best of men.

Henry wanted to talk about women and horses. Steve liked to talk about women, but I had come to talk about literature.

I talked about poets one after the other. Lowell, Ginsberg, Alexander Pope. "He's a jerk, he's a crook, he's a phoney," he answered, one after the other flicking them down with equal distain. I went on.

We talked about Cummings. He liked Cummings. He smiled "He made me laugh," said Henry. "That's literature. And he never wrote too much. He knew when to stop."

"I like Cummings," said Steve. He was feeling less uncomfortable. I drank my beer and looked around the room.

His typewriter sat in the corner on a broken metal table. On his demolished desk stood a sorting case taken from the post office filled with letters, poems, apples, children's toys and stamp cardboards.

"So you liked Cummings," I said. I felt ridiculous. I had come as a reporter and I was getting my story. Did you like Williams? I do not know what he said to that. Maybe he said nothing.

Steve sat sipping his beer. I sat smoking my cigar. Hours passed. We stared at each other through the smoke and the beer. I asked him about Eliot, about Proust, about Dreiser. Sometimes he would nod, sometimes stamp his feet, sometimes wave me away with his hand. At times he snorted and swore. At times he just rested his head on the comfortless sofa looking sleepy but polite. He was trying to figure me out. Was this kid putting him on? How long was I going to continue?

I had invaded his world. He let me in with all the grace he had, suspending judgement for a time. He hated but he did not offend. "It's ok kid," he said when I finally ground to the end of my rambling talk. "You got a lot to learn."

I asked him if he liked the Chinese poets. He said yes, "I like the English guy who translated the anthology." "Witter Bynner?" "No, stupid, the English guy." "You mean Waley." "Hey that's right," he answered. "The kid actually knows something." Steve laughed. "A little," he said. "I think we better go."

"No stay," said Henry. "I want to hear more about literature."

He was putting me on so I asked him about his working days, his days in jail, his daughter, his former wives. He told me all he could. He told it honestly. He offered me another cigar.

He smiled. He still hated my clothes but he smiled.

Deep down inside I knew I had done something wrong. He knew that too but his eyes told me to forget it. He had lived for ten men. He was tough. He could take it. That's what I thought his eyes said. Maybe I was wrong.



He went to the bathroom and vomited. When he came out he reached for two of his books signed them and dropped them on the table. He had written "To my literary friend."

"I think we better go," said Steve.

"No stay," said Henry. He patted me on the back. He patted Steve on the back.

"Any time you need anything you can count on me," I lied. He laughed that off. I felt very ill. I got what I had come for and now it was time to scram.

Henry wanted us to stay. I had had my look at the lion in the zoo and I was satisfied. Henry knew all that but it didn't bother him. Steve stood up. I made for the door. "We could talk all night, even about literature. You can sleep on the couch," he said to the both of us. I sensed the loneliness. I felt ill, I felt truly evil.

"No," I said, "I have to get home to my wife." It was a convenient though truthful lie.

"Ok then," he said. "Ok."

I went back several times after that, sometimes with Steve, sometimes alone, but it was never the same. I'd bring the cigars and he listened as I talked about Faulkner or Henry James. He'd grunt a little, then smoke in silence. After a while I went away and did not come back. I left him to the others who came with more beer to talk about Dali or Lawrence or G. B. Shaw but never about horses or women. His life he shared with them, but they all held their cards close to their chests like me. He was up front, we were abstract.

One night I read about him belting a poet his own age, another time he supposedly wrecked a wedding and then a friend told me how he destroyed all the china in the house of a local English prof. He was making his way. The stories mounted up. I never checked back with him to see if they were true or not. I suppose they were true. Did it really matter?

I had gone to see Artaud and Chatterton and Rimbaud and Céline all rolled into one and I had seen him. That was all I wanted. I am a selfish man. I left him to his work and to his women and to his horses. I asked Steve many times about him after that but I never had the nerve to see him again face to face, naked as he was.

-- Ben Pleasants

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